

## Self-Denial As a Spiritual Practice to Increase Faith and Knowledge

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**Abstract:** The Christian and Jewish religious traditions are embedded in asceticism practices including self-limitation, seclusion, fasting, vigils, and abstinence, among others. The practice of asceticism is influenced by the need to promote divinity and high levels of spiritual piety. Individuals and groups of people who subscribe to asceticism are committed to religious beliefs, fasting, and overall seclusion from the world. In the Christian religion, God is the ultimate drive for ascetic practices in which believers acquire comfort and solace. Asceticism is also uniquely practiced among different people, religions, and even organizations. Traditional practices of asceticism are still prevalent in monasteries and include fasting, chastity, and sleeping.

**Keywords:** celibacy, Judaism, Christianity, modernity, spiritual piety, God, and fasting

### 1.

Asceticism refers to the voluntary choice of living an abstention form of life that involves self-denial, rather than living a life where there are eternal forces that push and influence one to perform unforeseen practices<sup>130</sup>. Ascetics actively participate in the voluntary renunciation of secular activities and sensual pleasures associated with materialism. Self-denial is conceptualized as the preference of exploring the religion through salvation, increasing faith and knowledge of the creator, and finding atonement in replacement of worldly delights<sup>131</sup>. The origin of asceticism is traced back to early theology where the concept was prac-

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<sup>130</sup>Clements, Niki Kasumi, "The Asceticism of Interpretation: John Cassian, Hermeneutical Askēsis, and Religious Ethics," *Scripture, Tradition, and Reason in Christian Ethics* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2019), 67.

<sup>131</sup>Douglas, Kelly Brown, *What's Faith Got to Do with It? Black bodies/Christian souls* (Orbis books, 2018), 123.

ticed to achieve religious piety through self-limitation, and denial of sexual delights as commonly practiced by Catholic believers. In the catholic domains, the nuns and priests maintained their religious beliefs by foregoing worldly desires such as marrying and creating a family<sup>132</sup>. Even though the Christian and Jewish religions have a similar notion of asceticism, their faiths and beliefs are distinct; therefore the form of asceticism followed by one religion may be completely different from that of the other religion. The only similarity, in this case, is in the motivation and the underlying philosophy<sup>133</sup>. For example, whereas late-antiquity Christian authors promoted the spread of Christianity through beliefs contained in the Biblical scriptures, the Christian Catholic promoted spiritual devotion through celibacy practices. In the Bible, people like John the Baptist separated themselves from the people and went to the desert to wait on the Messiah as a form of asceticism<sup>134</sup>. The Jewish Essenes practiced asceticism through making vows of abstinence when they were being coached and prepared for what was referred to as a journey of ‘Holy War’<sup>135</sup>. This report provides an in-depth analysis of the different forms of religious and spiritual asceticism in the Christian and Jewish religions.

## 2. Concept of Asceticism Analysis

Asceticism broadly refers to individuals or a group of individuals in a religious setting who forgo worldly pleasures and interests to dedicate their lives and time to exploring and attaining spiritual growth. According to Podmore et al 2018<sup>136</sup>, asceticism involves a lifestyle in which

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<sup>132</sup> Alam, Sarwar, editor, *Cultural Fusion of Sufi Islam: Alternative Paths to Mystical Faith* (Routledge, 2019), 140.

<sup>133</sup> Taliaferro, Charles, and Elsa J. Marty, eds., *A Dictionary of Philosophy of Religion* (Bloomsbury Publishing, 2018), 40.

<sup>134</sup> Momen, Moojan. *Understanding Religion: A Thematic Approach* (Simon and Schuster, 2019), 55.

<sup>135</sup> Ebrey, David, “The Asceticism of the Phaedo: Pleasure, Purification, and the Soul’s Proper Activity,” *Archiv für Geschichte der Philosophie*, vol. 99, no. 1, 2017, 22.

<sup>136</sup> Podmore, Simon D., “Book review: The Religion of Existence: Asceticism in Philosophy from Kierkegaard to Sartre,” *Religious Studies*, vol. 54, no. 3, 2018, 440.

people denounce any form of material possession, social titles, and bodily pleasures to gain spiritual growth and development<sup>137</sup>. Individuals and groups of people who subscribe to the concept of asceticism are committed to religious beliefs, fasting, and overall seclusion from the world<sup>138</sup>. With this in mind, asceticism is therefore a voluntary choice of personal preservation by foregoing the satisfaction of human desires and necessities such as creating a family, sexual satisfaction, food and beverages among other tangible possessions<sup>139</sup>. However, there has been evidence suggesting individuals and groups of individuals have been practicing the concept of asceticism for malicious gains attributed to ritual purity or cultism including black magic<sup>140</sup>. The Jewish religion provides a unique form of asceticism including the aspect of avoiding meals and foods which were regarded as being impure in the Mosaic Commandments<sup>141</sup>. In the Christian religion, God is the ultimate drive for the ascetic practices in which its believers acquire comfort and solace. In some cases, some people may opt to commit their whole lives to asceticism like the monks who make the ultimate decision to avoid any sexual engagements as a way of cleansing themselves and counting themselves as lucky human beings in the realm of heaven<sup>142</sup>.

Asceticism can be done partly or wholly committed to the practice like the Jewish 'Day of Atonement where the Jewish fast for a couple of days to demonstrate their holiness to their creator<sup>143</sup>. Asceticism is also uniquely practiced among different people, religions, and even organizations. For example, the Nazarites often avoided and abstained from

<sup>137</sup> Ebrey, David, "The Asceticism of the Phaedo: Pleasure, Purification, and the Soul's Proper Activity," 26.

<sup>138</sup> Nadler, Allan, *The faith of Mithnagdim: Rabbinic Responses to Hasidic Rapture* (London: JHU Press, 1999), 89.

<sup>139</sup> Khawaja, Noreen, *The Religion of Existence: Asceticism in Philosophy from Kierkegaard to Sartre* (University of Chicago Press, 2016), 45.

<sup>140</sup> Vuolanto, Ville, *Children and Asceticism in Late Antiquity: Continuity, Family Dynamics and the Rise of Christianity* (Routledge, 2016), 66.

<sup>141</sup> Conrad, Jeffrey, "Egyptian and Syrian Asceticism in Late Antiquity," *Syriac Studies*, 2015, 12.

<sup>142</sup> Ibid.

<sup>143</sup> Zaleski, John, *Christianity, Islam, and the Religious Culture of Late Antiquity: A Study of Asceticism in Iraq and Northern Mesopotamia*, dissertation, 2019, 409.

drinking and fasted as they approached Easter<sup>144</sup>. It is worth mentioning that the asceticism of avoiding beverages and food could be practiced partly or wholly throughout the fasting period depending on the group and the religion in question. For example, abstinence from material possessions was different among different people, groups, and religions<sup>145</sup>. The attitudes and behaviors of the Jewish were highly defined based on their levels of food and beverage abstinence. The Judaic and the Christian religions, therefore, demonstrate a transitive dynamism in their ascetic practices which demonstrate humility and respect for a higher deity and adoration to their creator.

### 3. Types of religious asceticism

Spiritual growth and development are greatly influenced by aspects of asceticism towards the acquisition of virtues and values that promote adoration of a higher deity<sup>146</sup>. The religious aspects of asceticism are diverse and include fasting or renunciation, celibacy or sexual abstinence, renunciation of belongings, self-flagellation, and self-mutilation<sup>147</sup>. Contemporary asceticism is set against societal and worldly demands involving clothing, food, air, shelter, friendship, conversation, and pleasure, among other things<sup>148</sup>. For this to be adhered to diligently, followers and subscribers of different forms of asceticism need to be disciplined in vigilance, being tolerant of pain, silence, solitude, self-limitation, and self-transcendence<sup>149</sup>.

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<sup>144</sup> Streib, Heinz, and Ralph W. Hood, "Modeling the Religious Field: Religion, Spirituality, Mysticism and Related World Views," *Implicit Religion*, vol. 16, no. 2, 2013, 60.

<sup>145</sup> Ibid.

<sup>146</sup> Zaleski, John, *Christianity, Islam, and the Religious Culture of Late Antiquity: A Study of Asceticism in Iraq and Northern Mesopotamia*, 409.

<sup>147</sup> Hunt, Hannah, *Clothed in the Body: Asceticism, the Body and the Spiritual in the Late Antique Era* (Routledge, 2016), 70.

<sup>148</sup> MacDonald, Margaret Y., *Children and Asceticism in Late Antiquity: Continuity, Family Dynamics, and the Rise of Christianity* by Ville Vuolanto (review), *Journal of Early Christian Studies*, vol. 26, no.2, 2018, 330-332.

<sup>149</sup> Nathan, Geoffrey, *Children And Asceticism In Late Antiquity: Continuity, Family Dynamics And The Rise Of Christianity* (review), *The Journal of Roman Studies*, vol. 107, 2017, 457-458.

### 3.1 Celibacy

Celibacy involves complete avoidance and abstinence from sexual activities to promote one's spiritual and religious growth<sup>150</sup>. Celibacy can be further practiced to diffuse the need for sexual engagement by disengaging oneself from an environment that may lead to such activities that are termed unclean in the eyes of the specific religion. Celibacy is a practice that assists in the development of spiritual connection and divinity through the development of self-discipline, self-control, and the development of ethical and moral principles<sup>151</sup>. Celibacy is closely related to renunciation geared towards living a purified life. Celibates are referred to as 'eunuchs' in the Christian religion. According to Matthew 9:12, eunuchs are regarded as celibate individuals who are pure and hence promised the kingdom of heaven. The Christian Biblical scripture explains that people who practice celibacy practice the ideal way in which believers should lead their lives and avoid worldly desires including sex<sup>152</sup>. Therefore, the concept of celibacy goes beyond bodily desires to fulfill freedom in achieving understanding.

### 3.2 Solitude

Solitude involves the process of withdrawal from society for purposes of religious fulfillment<sup>153</sup>. People or groups of individuals may opt to withdraw mentally and physically to different kinds of areas like mountains, deserts, or areas that are secluded from distractions and interruptions. This means that when people seclude themselves physically and mentally from people and worldly operations, they are likely to minimize their chances of committing sins<sup>154</sup>. Solitude, therefore, provides a distinct way of life

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<sup>150</sup> Sahner, Christian C., "'The Monasticism of My Community is Jihad': A Debate on Asceticism, Sex, and Warfare in Early Islam," *Arabica*, vol. 64, no. 2, 2017, 149-183.

<sup>151</sup> Meawad, Stephen M., "Sexuality, Angelification, and Divine Indwelling: A Contemporary Ethic of Early Christian Asceticism," *Modern Theology*, 2019, 67.

<sup>152</sup> Loosley-Leeming, Emma, *Architecture and Asceticism: Cultural Interaction between Syria and Georgia in Late Antiquity* (Brill, 2018), 50.

<sup>153</sup> Deezia, Burabari Sunday, "Asceticism: A Match towards the Absolute," *IAFOR Journal of Ethics, Religion & Philosophy*, vol. 3, 2017, 85-98.

<sup>154</sup> Ibid.

from the ordinary form of life that most people are used to.

### 3.3 Fasting

Fasting involves abstaining, restricting, and avoiding any form of drinking or eating for a given period<sup>155</sup>. The process of fasting is quite different among different people and their religious beliefs in terms of its purposes, length, and its degree<sup>156</sup>. For example, in the Christian religion, fasting can last for forty days. Believers abstain from some kinds of foods and forego some meals whereas, in Judaism, the practice of fasting is regarded as a total cessation of drinks and foods. However, the basic concept of fasting in the Christian religion requires sacrificing drinks and foods during the passion of Christ commemoration<sup>157</sup>.

### 3.4 Nocturnal vigils

Nocturnal vigils or memorial services refer to self-denial of sleep which is essentially deliberate for a specific time in the night or the entire night<sup>158</sup>. The individual or a group of people essentially stay up in the night for purposes of prayer, contemplation, or offering sacrifices to achieve a set goal or objective<sup>159</sup>. The practice of nocturnal vigils is significant as it symbolizes a deep sense of fulfillment of a religious desire by renouncing the fulfillment of bodily desires like resting.

### 3.5 Ascetic suffering

Ascetic suffering may be in form of self-flagellation, self-laceration, castration and other forms which produce some kind of pain in the body<sup>160</sup>. According to Salminen<sup>161</sup>, pain from ascetism provided the

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<sup>155</sup> Bradley, Kyle R., *Children and Asceticism in Late Antiquity: Continuity, Family Dynamics and the Rise of Christianity* by Ville Vuolanto (review), *The Journal of the History of Childhood and Youth*, vol. 9, no. 2, 2016, 325-326.

<sup>156</sup> Ibid.

<sup>157</sup> Salminen, Joona, *Asceticism and Early Christian Lifestyle* (Helsinki: Helsingin yliopisto, 2017), 15-21.

<sup>158</sup> Ibid.

<sup>159</sup> Ibid., 15.

<sup>160</sup> Ibid., 16.

<sup>161</sup> Ibid., 17.

freedom of becoming self-transcendent and developing feelings of self-surrender, ecstasy, and a high level of consciousness. According to Teresa<sup>162</sup>, Christian Monasteries including monks often engaged in self-torturous activities like scourging and whipping themselves.

#### 4. The Importance of the Concept of Asceticism

The goal of asceticism is to develop high levels of religious piety, religious moral practices, and higher spiritual divinity. All the goals are achieved through abstinence and avoidance of worldly and bodily pleasures and desires. According to Rapp et al<sup>163</sup>, ascetic practices assist individuals in developing magical and supernatural abilities that are sometimes beyond human understanding. In some cultures, ascetics performed the role of intermediaries between human beings and their religious creator, hence the practice is held in high regard in such societies. Additionally, the concept of asceticism promotes the growth and nurturing of religious beliefs through the cultivation of moral principles like respect, trust, and responsibility<sup>164</sup>.

According to Ramelli<sup>165</sup>, asceticism serves as a component of cultural preservation and production by encouraging individuals or the community to be aware of and understand their cultural environment and its underlying factors that promotes its sustainability. Through the practice of asceticism, people can envision the process of human existence and the needed perceptual modification and reconditioning<sup>166</sup>. Moreover, ascetics have a distinct way of envisioning and interpreting the world, hence novices must understand the ways through which different beliefs relate to ascetic practices. Additionally, the concept of asceticism has promoted the understanding of different religious practices

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<sup>162</sup> Teresa M. Shaw, *The Burden of the Flesh: Fasting and Sexuality in Early Christianity* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, 1998), 5-6.

<sup>163</sup> Rapp, Claudia, review of Ilaria Ramelli's *Social Justice and The Legitimacy of Slavery: The Role of Philosophical Asceticism from Ancient Judaism to Christianity*, *The Journal of Roman Studies*, vol. 108, 2018, 313-314.

<sup>164</sup> Ibid.

<sup>165</sup> Ramelli, Ilaria. *Social Justice and the Legitimacy of Slavery: The Role of Philosophical Asceticism from Ancient Judaism to Late Antiquity* (Oxford University Press, 2016), 34-45.

<sup>166</sup> Ibid.

transferred from one generation to another, hence assisting people, especially in the modern era, in understanding the intended meaning and value of certain beliefs and practices in society<sup>167</sup>.

## 5. Asceticism in the Modernity Context

Asceticism in religious practices has been largely abandoned in contemporary religious environment and society<sup>168</sup>. In modernity, asceticism has gradually evolved into the adoption of intellectual elements which focus on the flesh. According to Wimbush et al<sup>169</sup>, modern spiritual practices and individuals like the monks often integrate the concept of intellectual austerity into their asceticism practices.

Ascetic practices have also evolved into new behaviours and habits which are driven by desires and pleasures<sup>170</sup> considered immoral. For example, catholic priests and nuns have been criticized for practices that go against their ascetic practice with traces of unfaithfulness and immorality being practiced within the church. Monks who were traditionally not allowed to work have been forced into the workforce to support themselves, and monasteries have been forced into the workforce to fulfil their tax obligations due to the few donations received in the contemporary modern world<sup>171</sup>. Despite these changes, the traditional practices of asceticism are still prevalent in the current monasteries including fasting and chastity.

## 6. Further Analysis of the Asceticism Concept

Human beings have always striven to avoid suffering by deferring any norm or value that may promote suffering. Therefore, self-inflicted suffering has not resonated well with many people in society<sup>172</sup>. This self-infliction is promoted to demonstrate one's devotion and adherence to

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<sup>167</sup> Ibid.

<sup>168</sup> Wimbush, Vincent L., and Richard Valantasis, eds., *Asceticism* (Oxford University Press, 2002), 40.

<sup>169</sup> Ibid.

<sup>170</sup> Ibid.

<sup>171</sup> Cf. von Stuckrad, Kocku, et al., eds., *The Brill Dictionary of Religion*, vol. 4 (Leiden: Brill, 2006).

<sup>172</sup> Ibid.

the principles of God as per Christian beliefs. However, what remains controversial and overly confusing is the magnitude and level of pain or suffering that should be inflicted on someone to demonstrate their devotion to God<sup>173</sup>. For religious purposes including the ability to grow closer to God, demonstrate devotion, perform penance and even obtain sexual arousal. However, according to Brown<sup>174</sup>, the extreme infliction of pain and suffering does not resonate with the divine dictum of love from God as per Judaism and Christianity. Additionally, extreme practices such as self-limitation, seclusion, and extreme fasting are criticized for being self-centred practices within the Christian and Jewish religions. Asceticism can also be understood from the cross-cultural perspective in which a distinction is made between ascetic practice by the monks and renunciants and asceticism practiced by Protestants. According to Emile Durkheim<sup>175</sup>, religion is a holistic concept from which individuals cannot easily detach themselves without the infliction of some pain, especially in cultic religions.

## 7. Asceticism in Christianity and Judaism

The Jewish and Christian religions have diverse and distinct religious practices based on their varied doctrines. These religions also integrate some ascetic practices which provide some similarities and differences.

### 7.1 Christian asceticism

In Christianity, asceticism allows believers to be driven by the need to develop and improve their spiritual lives by de-emphasizing worldly and bodily pleasures. The Christian form of asceticism involves high levels of renunciation of worldly and bodily interests and desires to gain spiritual nourishment and fulfilment<sup>176</sup>. Christian believers integrate the concept of self-

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<sup>173</sup> Ibid.

<sup>174</sup> Brown, George Hardin, review of Michael D. Cherniss *Ingeld and Christ: Heroic Concepts and Values in Old English Poetry*, *Speculum*, vol. 50, no. 3 (1975): 482-485.

<sup>175</sup> **Durkheim, Emile**, *The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life. A Study in Religious Sociology* (George Allen & Unwin, 1915), 25.

<sup>176</sup> Glücklich, Ariel, "Sacred pain: The use of Self-Inflicted Pain in Religion," *The Routledge Handbook of Philosophy of Pain* (Routledge, 2017), 277-287.

limitation to promote self-discipline and morality which contribute to the acquisition of religious piety. Asceticism has some similarities with monasteries in seclusion from society to promote the fulfilment of religious desires and obligations. Even though ascetic practices have been attributed to monks and Christian religious leaders, not all Christian religious leaders and monks are ascetics<sup>177</sup>. According to Christian beliefs, not all flesh is considered sinister requiring ascetic practices.

Biblical sources such as Corinthians 9:27 and 1<sup>st</sup> Peter 2: 11 demonstrate the asceticism practices of fasting, holding night vigils, and offering sacrifices as being practiced in the Christian religion<sup>178</sup>.

## 7.2 Judaism and asceticism

Judaism and its practices of asceticism are influenced by the understanding that denial of the flesh and its desires through self-mortification can promote spiritual piety<sup>179</sup>. Judaism has been comprised of many ascetic groups, including the Rechabites who only drank water and never indulged in wine. Generally, however, the ascetic practices in the ancient Jewish religion were syncretistic, narrow, and brief. Genesis 1:28 explains how the Jews abstained from eating meat, but the practice was later allowed in Genesis 9:3<sup>180</sup>. Ascetic practices gained momentum again after the Jerusalem temple was destroyed and people were advised to abstain from meat as a sign of mourning. Later the practice was again dropped even though the Nazarites continued the practice of abstaining from eating meat and drinking wine. They also cut off their hair as a form of expressing their holiness.

Jews practiced asceticism through fasting when they were distressed and wanted to directly communicate with God. Believers fasted for four days as a way of mourning the destruction of the Jerusalem temple. This is how the communal fast commonly known as Easter was developed into its form practiced in the present day<sup>181</sup>.

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<sup>177</sup> Ibid.

<sup>178</sup> Ibid.

<sup>179</sup> Conrad, Jeffrey, "Egyptian and Syrian Asceticism in Late Antiquity," 12.

<sup>180</sup> Ibid.

<sup>181</sup> Zaleski, John, *Christianity, Islam, and the Religious Culture of Late Antiquity: A Study of Asceticism in Iraq and Northern Mesopotamia*, 409.

## 8. Asceticism in a Philosophical Point of View

Philosophers such as St. Maximus Confessor records early forms of asceticism in his works like *The Ascetic Life: the Four Centuries of Charity*. Confessor's writing provides a useful theological and historical understanding of the concept of asceticism, especially on the elements of compassion, divinity, well-being, and spirituality<sup>182</sup>. Maximus's philosophy addressed individual desire and inclinations in regard to religious beliefs and activities<sup>183</sup>. His early philosophies addressed the relationship between the church, man, and God, to establish ascetic principles and morals. The desire to develop ascetic morals and principles within the Jewish and Christian religions is influenced by the self-determination of individuals and the desire for spiritual fulfillment and revelation obtained from abstinence and ascetic practices<sup>184</sup>.

According to Maximus, the function of ascetic practice is to provide a connection and bridge between God's spiritual realm through divine worship and the self-limiting practices<sup>185</sup>. St Maximus asks how self-determination and human nature can be fully integrated to promote understanding and minimize contradictory practices in ascetic life. According to Maximus, the will of man is a natural process exercised by the prevailing desires and conditions. Self-determination is influenced by human modes of incarnation<sup>186</sup>. For example, in the Bible, Adam is demonstrated as being self-determinative by being virtuous and moral despite eating the forbidden fruit.

Plato is another philosopher who provides significant insights that promote an understanding of ascetic practices. Plato, who foresees many of Maximus' concepts, illustrates that Jewish and Christian beliefs and values can be achieved through moral discipline and self-mastery by being self-determinative and developing reason<sup>187</sup>. Principles of asceticism

<sup>182</sup> Conrad, Jeffrey, "Egyptian and Syrian Asceticism in Late Antiquity," 12.

<sup>183</sup> Zaleski, John. *Christianity, Islam, and the Religious Culture of Late Antiquity: A Study of Asceticism in Iraq and Northern Mesopotamia*, 409.

<sup>184</sup> Douglas, Kelly Brown, *What's Faith Got to Do with It? Black bodies/Christian souls* (Orbis books, 2018), 123.

<sup>185</sup> Ibid.

<sup>186</sup> Taliaferro, Charles, and Elsa J. Marty, eds., *A Dictionary of Philosophy of Religion* (Bloomsbury Publishing USA, 2018), 40.

<sup>187</sup> Momen, Moojan, *Understanding Religion: A Thematic Approach* (Simon and Schuster, 2019), 55.

are based on self-restraining certain worldly needs and desires which are subconscious. Plato further explains that the human brain is provided with two options, either pleasure or pain, and naturally the brain will choose the positive feeling of pleasure. When an individual accepts and internalizes ascetic practices, he or she is able to suppress some desires by increasing moral development. Man is then able to prevent himself from falling into temptations and committing mistakes. Man thereby develops into a resilient and persistent individual motivated to overcome life's challenges through subconscious interaction promoting transformation of selfishness and wilful egoism. According to Plato, man is then able to become self-sufficient by having a sound mind to distinguish right from wrong and be healthy physically and cognitively<sup>188</sup>.

To attain the highest level of satisfaction and unity, man is obligated to act according to ascetic morals and principles<sup>189</sup>. Man's character is the determinant of the process of self-realization<sup>190</sup>. When a man wants to truly change and transform, he must make the necessary sacrifice willingly and thereby condition his brain structure towards compromising and reconciliation.

## 9. Philosophical Arguments and Review of Religious Asceticism

Self-limiting activities, renunciation, and abstinences are characteristics of religious asceticism. Religious asceticism is also attributed to tendencies of long fasting periods, seclusion from the world, and self-inflicted pain. Bentham<sup>191</sup> argues against asceticism based on these attributes. First, Bentham argues that the principles and moral guidelines of asceticism are not reliable. Secondly, Bentham critically questions how a large number of people and even groups of people can commit to fulfilling their spiritual desires, especially through pain-inflicting practices<sup>192</sup>. According to Bentham, these practices are obnoxious and do not make sense at all<sup>193</sup>.

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<sup>188</sup> Ibid.

<sup>189</sup> Khawaja, Noreen, *The Religion of Existence: Asceticism in Philosophy from Kierkegaard to Sartre* (University of Chicago Press, 2016), 45.

<sup>190</sup> Ibid.

<sup>191</sup> Nadler, Allan, *The faith of Mithnagdim: Rabbinic Responses to Hasidic Rapture* (London: JHU Press, 1999), 89.

<sup>192</sup> Ibid.

<sup>193</sup> Ibid.

Based on understanding the natural constitution of the human frame, human beings are naturally and holistically required to embrace and integrate the utility principle in regard to any activity to be performed<sup>194</sup>. Relevant to this is the extent to which actions at issue promote or diminish happiness. This means that the material consumption and engagement of people in ascetic practices are influenced and maintained by the utility principle. Additionally, ascetic principles influence people to seek satisfaction and fulfilment of their intrinsic needs based on their actions even though there is no limit and effective understanding of the boundaries and limitations of these actions.

However, the moral principles of asceticism provide a complete contrast to the utility principle. This is because the process of disapproving of ascetic tendencies is likely to increase the outcomes related to pleasure, hence the criticism. According to Bentham, both common people and educated people can still be influenced by religion or morality. However, it becomes more complicated to understand what kind of moral principles or even religion can influence man's actions, activities, and overall nature<sup>195</sup>. Bentham explains that the religious practices and their beliefs in asceticism deny people necessary logic, thus preventing them from being critical and pursuing desires and interests that fully satisfy them and makes their lives fulfilling. Therefore, asceticism denies people pleasure by providing practices that create barriers to seeking and fulfilling one's happiness<sup>196</sup>.

## 10. Limitations of Asceticism

Philosophers such as Maximus and Plato argue that the limitations inherent in the ascetic practices end up affecting the capacity of believers to be able to effectively commit and uphold those practices<sup>197</sup>. As people try to seek spiritual divinity and piety through ascetic practices, they end up losing the essential value and meaning of feelings and common activities for the pursuit of religious nourishment. The lack of rationalism

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<sup>194</sup> Ibid.

<sup>195</sup> Vuolanto, Ville, *Children and Asceticism in Late Antiquity: Continuity, Family Dynamics and the Rise of Christianity* (Routledge, 2016), 66.

<sup>196</sup> Ibid.

<sup>197</sup> Ibid.

ends up affecting the development and achievement of moral requirements in the broader society<sup>198</sup>. The Jewish and Christian religions integrate cosmology in seeking higher traditional and spiritual deities. Ascetic practices end up limiting man by restricting inclinations in promoting morality because personal fulfilment remains a natural and important need for human beings.

## 11. Conclusion

Self-denial is conceptualized as the preference for exploring religion through salvation, increasing faith and knowledge of the creator, and finding atonement in the absence of worldly delights. People who subscribe to asceticism are committed to religious beliefs, fasting, and overall withdrawal from the world. In the Christian religion, God is the ultimate drive for the ascetic practices in which believers acquire comfort and solace. Asceticism is also uniquely practiced among different people, religions, and even organizations. For example, the Nazarites often avoided and abstained from drinking and fasted as they approached Easter. Asceticism promotes the growth and nurturing of religious beliefs through the cultivation of moral principles like respect, trust, and responsibility. The traditional practices of asceticism are still prevalent in the current monasteries and include fasting and chastity.

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<sup>198</sup> Streib, Heinz, and Ralph W. Hood, "Modeling the Religious Field: Religion, Spirituality, Mysticism and Related World Views," *Implicit Religion*, vol. 16, no. 2, 2013, 60.